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ABSTRACT

High school students in Venezuela study English grammar and vocabulary for 5 years, but, because theirs is an oral culture, they do very little reading or writing either in their native language or in English. When students reach the university and begin to study composition, they are unmotivated to write essays on teacher assigned topics for a number of reasons. The 5-paragraph essay instruction becomes tiring and boring and students fail to move into more in-depth writing. Courses that emphasize writing as a process allow for the transference of first language writing strategies to second language learning. One effective writing strategy is to have students practice freewriting, a technique used in prewriting, then read some of their writing, to integrate the 4 language modes--reading, writing, speaking, listening. Another technique is to have students write 2-3 journal entries a week which are reviewed by the instructor, who gives response to content, not surface errors. A process approach to writing was introduced to teach Russian students in the Ukraine. The use of cluster maps helps students generate and organize ideas, with small group discussion to clarify meaning. Drawing and labelling a house or flat plan is another effective lesson. (Examples, a lesson plan, and 5 references are included.) (CR)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The Five-Paragraph Essay--Legacy or Liability in Wnglish Writing Classrooms outside the U.S.

Lorna Van Gilst and José Villalobos

4C's March 1996

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Introduction

I am a language teacher from Venezuela who has been teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the University of the Andes, Mérida, for eight years. English is taught in Venezuela as a foreign language and it is a compulsory subject within the secondary school curriculum. My Spanish speaking students at the university are learning English in order to become either English teachers at the secondary school level or Spanish/English translators.

Venezuelan students study English grammar and vocabulary for five years in high school, but they do very little reading or writing, either in their native language or in English, because the Venezuelan culture is an oral culture instead of a reading and writing culture. Most Venezuelans have few books in their homes; they grow up watching television. Even in my family home, we had only four shelves of books, consisting of four sets of encyclopedias. We were a family of students, but even today many families have no books in their homes. On the other hand, you can expect to find a television set in every bedroom, where families often gather there around the TV.

Even in Spanish, reading and writing is limited. Elementary and secondary students mostly read textbooks and their writing basically consists of copying from those textbooks.

When these students go to the university, and register in my class, they have taken one semester of English in a course called English I, where the emphasis is on grammar and vocabulary too. By the time they get to my class, English II, their level of English language competence can be considered as beginner/intermediate.

The Problem

Following English II, the students take Composition I and Composition II. These courses too are limited to the study of the grammar structure and rhetorical patterns of the language. In Composition I the students write short paragraphs of description, narration, comparison/contrast, definition, persuasion, and finally argumentation. In Composition II they try to pull these modes together into five-paragraph essays, and eventually into longer research papers. The instructors pattern their teaching methods after those they learned ten or fifteen years ago in graduate study in the United States. The emphasis on the process of writing-as-meaning is restricted or ignored.

For a number of reasons, students are unmotivated to write essays on teacher-assigned topics, the repetition of five-paragraph essay instruction becomes tiring and boring, and students fail to move to more in-depth writing. That is why I have been working on the creation of courses that emphasize writing as a process.

Theoretical rationale for the teaching of writing as a process

Extensive research has been done on the nature, development, and transference of first language writing strategies to second language writing. We have heard this from Donald Graves, Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, David and Yvonne Freeman, and Stephen Krashen.

Stephen Krashen (1984) notes that writing is not a linear process with a series of discrete stages. It is, instead, a recursive process that varies with each individual and each writing task.

Although the writing process varies from writer to another, several studies (Krashen, 1984; Pianko, 1979; Sommers, 1980) have shown that experienced writers generally tend to follow a process of organizing their writing process: prewriting, writing, revising, and editing.

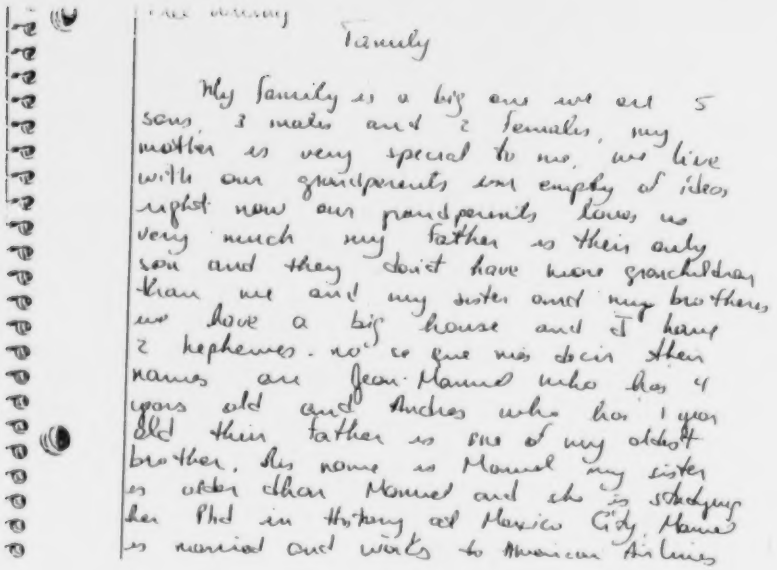
I am going to focus on a couple of teaching strategies that I have found effective in helping my students write in English as a foreign language. One of these strategies is "freewriting, " a technique that is used in the prewriting stage.

Freewriting:

Peter Elbow (1973) and Donald Murray (1991) say that before they write, sometimes they start collecting information by brainstorming a list, putting down everything they know about the topic they are going to research, or sometimes they fastwrite a "what-I-know" draft.

I ask my students to think about a topic and then to write nonstop for several minutes. Sometimes I give the students prompts to get them started, if they need help. While they are writing, I also freewrite.

I don't expect my first semester students to write long and complete, coherent, grammatical sentences, but I ask them to make a list of words related to the topic. For example, when I ask my students to write about topics of their interest, types of food they like (favorite food--food of a certain region) (typify American food), entertainment (kinds of activities that they enjoy doing in their free time), types of music in our culture that they like most, television programs they watch, they respond like this:

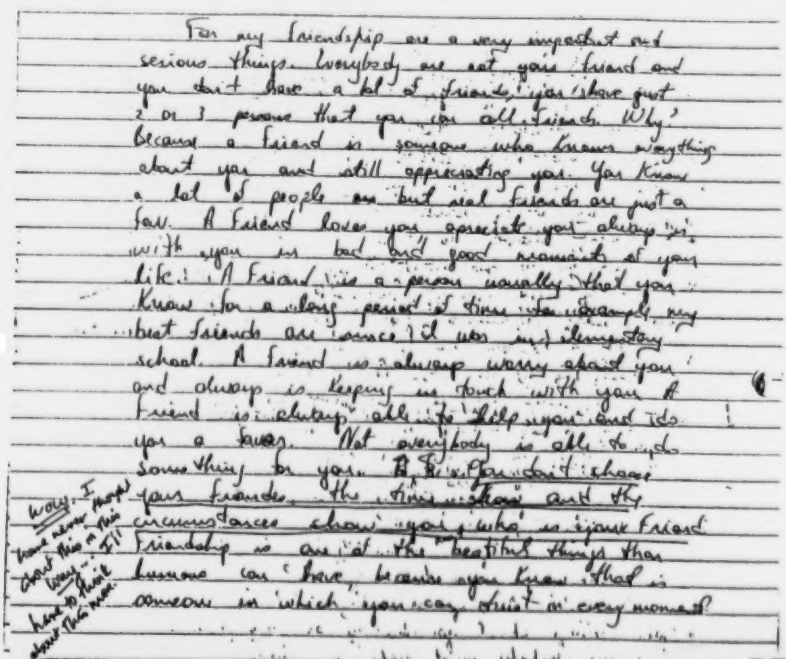


Family

My family is a big one we are 5 sons, 3 males and 2 females, my mother is very special to me, we live with our grandparents am empty of ideas right now our grandparents loves us very much my father is their only son and they don't have more grandchildren than me and my sister and my brother we have a big house and I have 2 nephews-no se que mas decir their names are Jean Manuel who has 4 years old and Andres who has 1 year old their father is one of my oldest brother, his name is Manuel my sister is older than Manuel and she is studying her Phd in History at Mexico City, Manuel is married and works to American Airlines.)

(My family is a big one we are all 5 sons, 3 males and 2 females, my mother is very special to me, we live with our grandparents am empty of ideas right now our grandparents loves us very much my father is their only son and they don't have more grandchildren than me and my sister and my brother we have a big house and I have 2 nephews-no se que mas decir their names are Jean Manuel who has 4 years old and Andres who has 1 year old their father is one of my oldest brother, his name is Manuel my sister is older than Manuel and she is studying her Phd in History at Mexico City, Manuel is married and works to American Airlines.)

The following is an example of a freewriting activity from a more advanced student:



For my friendship are a very important and serious things. Everybody are not your friend and you don't have a lot of friends, you have just 2 or 3 persons that you can all friends. Why? Because a friend is someone who knows anything about you and still appreciating you. You know a lot of people are but real friends are just a few. A friend loves you appreciate you always is with you in bad and good moments of your life. A friend is a person usually that you know for a along period of time we example my best friends are since I was in elementary school. A friend is always worry about you and always is keeping in touch with you A friend is always able to help you and do you a favor. Not everybody is able to do something to you. A friend don't abuse your friends, the friendship and the circumstances show you who is your friend Friendship is one of the beautiful things than human can have, because you know that is someone in which you can trust in every moment

Way I don't know how to say this I'll leave it this way

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(For my friendship are very important serious things. Everybody are not your friend and you don't have a lot of friends, you have just 2 or 3 persons that you can call friends. Why? Because a friend is someone who knows everything about you and still appreciating you. You know a lot of people but real friends are just a few. A friend loves you, apreciate you always is with you in bad and good moments of your life. A friend is a person usually that you know for a long period of time. For example, my best friends are since I was in elementary school. A friend is always worry about you and always is keeping in touch with you. A friend is always able to help you and do you a favor. Not everybody is able to do something for you. You don't choose your friends. The time show and the circumstances show you who is your friend. Friendship is one of the beautiful things that humans can have, because you know that is someone in which you trust in every moment).

I ask the students to talk about their freewriting ideas; some students volunteer to read what they have written, because I want them to integrate the four language modes--reading, writing, speaking, listening.

After they talk, I have beginning students draft and shape their ideas into a four- or five-sentence paragraph. I have the more advanced students compose longer pieces. After they write a first draft, I ask the students to pair up and read each other's papers. At this point I tell them to talk only about the ideas, as we do in first language peer conferences. However, if a student has a question about a certain verb form or another grammar question, then we (the peer or I) answer that question because that student is obviously ready for that information. At the proofreading stage we work on grammatical form and punctuation so that the students have a correct model.

Journal Keeping:

I ask my students to write two or three entries a week in their journals. They write about anything they want to--personal experiences, school experiences, the class. Then they give their journals to me for my written responses. I respond to content, not to surface errors. I return the journals to the students and then ask them to choose one of those entries and start drafting a text. From there the process is the same as with the freewriting activity. Again, I integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Ukrainian Context

As a teacher of English in Kharkov, Ukraine, I was asked to introduce essay writing to students whose native language is Russian. My specific mandate was to teach the forms of the expository essay, with the suggestion that "the five-paragraph essay would be a great help."

Most of my students were Russian speakers who hope to become interpreters or teachers of English. Ukrainian culture is an avid reading culture, but student writing is limited to reproduction of memorized sentences as examples of English grammar usage, usually gleaned from somewhat outdated British grammar books. Students are not encouraged to be original, but to copy. Their study of American culture, which is very popular, includes memorization of state birds, state flowers, and state nicknames as well as sections of American tourist guides and encyclopedias regarding climate and entertainment. Ukrainian students watch many hours of television, mostly old American sti-coms or soap operas, including the very popular "Santa Barbara," dubbed into Russian.

My students had no familiarity with the five-paragraph essay form; in fact, the only kind of writing they practiced was copying sections of informational pieces that they memorized for their exams. Several of their teachers who had applied to study in the U.S. had encountered writing requirements for TOEFL or GRE tests, and thus they were eager to learn the formula for American writing.

Having learned of Jose's difficulty in Venezuela with student writers who were trained primarily to write five-paragraph essays, I hesitated to introduce a formula that might have negative repercussions for Ukrainian students whose prior concept of writiing was limited to copying from Russian into English. I decided instead to introduce a process approach to writing. I knew, however, that though I had almost 90-minute classes, I would probably have a different combination of students every day. I had to either work through much of the process within the class period or introduce the process within the class period and trust students to continue the process outside of class.

On the basis of the research cited by José, I used several strategies in Ukraine that I have used successfully with students in the United States to help them generate and organize ideas. First we read portions of a book titled *What Americans Eat.* Then each small group composed a cluster map centered around the topic "What Urakinians Eat." From the cluster maps (see example), I asked the students to write several sentences about their favorite meal. Then they read their paragraphs within their small groups and helped one another clarify meaning. My interest in their foods resulted in a number of students writing polished drafts that they presented to me as a memory of Ukrainian hospitality.

These paragraphs were some of the first wrtiting they had done for a purpose other than passing an exam.

Designing house plans generated equal interest. First, on the chalkboard I drew a plan of my house. Then I labeled the rooms and their basic contents. Next I wrote a paragraph discussing my favorite room in the house. Because Ukrainian students are so eager to learn whatever they can about American culture, they took great interest in my house plan. But I was equally intrigued by theirs. Though many of their flats follow the basic two- or three-room plan, the students showed considerable originality in personalizing their own flats (see example). Then they composed paragraphs explaining how their flat differed from anyone else's. Students were quick to help one another with word choice or sentence flow. Near the end of the period we read our paragraphs, and again I was presented with copies from a number of the students. They were clearly proud of their writing.

Most satisfying to me was the joy these students expressed about writing something in English that they had composed. Quite spontaneously, several of them wrote in a voice that was genuinely theirs, and they wrote for a reader who wanted to know their thinking, not for a grade but for communication.

Nevertheless, I needed to address the matter of passing the TOEFL or GRE writing test. Thus, I encouraged students to consider the cluster map to be an organizing device to get ideas out on the page. They can name the main idea within the center and then include as many major points as necessary--there is nothing magical in having three supporting points, as the five-paragraph essay format assumes. Once they develop the cluster map, they can state the thesis of the paper by use of an opening paragraph, often one that comes out of experience. I emphasized the need to develop a train of ideas and finally, a conclusion, but not necessarily repetition of the thesis idea.

Ukrainian administrators still hold suspicion about encouraging student originality. But as university students take on their own classes of younger children, as many do already during their training, they beg for ways to motivate their young students to speak, to read, to think, and to write with purpose--in English.

By Lorna Van Gilst and José Villalobos

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Appendix

One Writing Process

A) Before Students Write

Brainstorming	Logging
Clustering	Reading
Listing	Mapping
Detailing	Outlining

B) While Students Write

Rhetorical Stance:

Voice --who am I? what do I know? what do I believe?

Audience--who's listening? what are they ready for? how will they respond?

Purpose--what do I want to happen? what is likely to result? what effect do I seek? what am I willing to accept?

Linguistic Choices:

Word Choice

Sentence Structure--length, verb structure

Sentence Type--simple, complex, compound

C) After Students Write

Revision:

Getting responses: editing groups, read-arounds

Raising questions, expanding, clarifying

Proofreading and polishing

Highlighting:

Sharing, Publishing, Posting

Adapted from J. Proett & K. Gill (1986). The writing process in action. Urbana, Ill. NCTE.

What Ukrainians Eat
Breakfast
eggs
strong tea
salad
tomatoes
cucumbers
Bread and butter
Cheese
Jam
juices
orange
tomato
currant
raspberry
sweets
tortes
ice cream
other meals
fried potatoes
rice
bleeni with jam
meat
chicken
beef
pork
fried fish
ahkroshkah
cucumber
eggs
onion
kvass
sour cream

Krivchenkova Ann

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